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Suicides in France Put Focus on Workplace



The day after a France Télécom employee committed suicide this week, five hundred people gathered outside the company's office in Lyon, France

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PARIS — Media attention to a recent spate of suicides at France Télécom has revealed a paradox at the heart of French society: even with robust labor protection, workers feel profoundly insecure, with many complaining that the pace of economic change is pushing them beyond their limits.

A popular image outside France is of a cosseted work force protected from layoffs by near-hermetic job security and pampered by a 35-hour workweek. But the reality is often different, according to experts, union representatives and the workers themselves.

“When I started as a psychiatrist, 35 years ago, my patients were talking about their personal lives,” said Marie-France Hirigoyen, a French psychiatrist who did pioneering work on bullying and workplace relations. “Now it’s all about their jobs. People are suffering in the workplace. They shouldn’t be, from the logic of management. After all, they have a good job, a nice vacation. But they are suffering.”

In statistical terms, the 24 suicides at France Télécom since February 2008 — including eight since the beginning of summer, with the latest confirmed on Monday — are not extraordinary for a company employing 102,000 people in France.

The World Health Organization put the suicide rate in France at 26.4 per 100,000 for men and 9.2 for women in 2005. That is the highest among large European economies, but still well behind Japan. In the United States, the comparable rates are 17.7 for men and 4.5 for women.

Mental health experts are always extremely cautious about attributing a suicide to any one cause: one often never knows what forces act upon a person. But what has caught the attention of the public and the French government is that many of the suicides, and more than a dozen failed suicides, have been attributed by some experts and labor officials to work-related problems.

Adding to that is what Dr. Hirigoyen described as the spectacular nature of some cases. In one case a man stabbed himself, hara-kiri style, in the middle of a meeting (he survived); in another, a woman killed herself by leaping from a fifth-floor office window. On Monday, a 51-year-old employee threw himself from a highway bridge.

“Stress has become a national sport,” said Michel Marchet, the secretary of the banking chapter of France’s General Confederation of Labor, or C.G.T. union. “We need employers to modify the way that they organize work, but we don’t have the impression that anything will happen soon.”

Despite the 35-hour workweek law, European Union data shows that the French last year worked a 41-hour week on average, putting them 13th of the 27 nations in the bloc. (Austria was ranked No. 1 at 44 hours.)

In 2006 and 2007, three technicians working at the automaker Renault’s research and development center, near Paris, committed suicide, according to Benoît Coquille, a company spokesman. At the time, union leaders cited pressures on the job.

In response, Carlos Ghosn, the Renault chief executive, went to the center to talk with workers and managers. Detailed questionnaires were sent to more than 11,000 employees, and face-to-face meetings were held to discuss work conditions. Mr. Coquille said the company decided to go back and explain again basic management rules throughout the chain of command.

It is impossible to say that there have been no additional work-related suicides, Mr. Coquille said, but since then, “there haven’t been any with an obvious connection to the job.”

France Télécom has hired Technologia, the same consulting firm that helped to guide Renault’s response, to assess its situation. It is in an unusual position: despite a partial privatization in 1997, two-thirds of the company’s work force are still classified as public servants and cannot be fired. Yet, even that level of job security can bring stress.

France Télécom is being forced to compete with private companies in a fast-moving global market. From 2006 through 2008, the company cut more than 22,000 jobs through voluntary departures. Nearly half of those were workers who either took early retirement, accepted transfers to civil service positions outside the company or left to start their own businesses with the company’s backing.

(By comparison, BT Group, the former British telephone monopoly that has been carrying out its own wrenching reorganization, cut 15,000 jobs in 2008 alone and has said it will cut an additional 15,000 this year.)

Sébastien Crozier, head of the Confederation of Professional and Managerial Staff, part of the general union at France Télécom, estimated that in the last five years, half of all France Télécom employees had either changed jobs internally, changed work locations, or both. That, he said, has created a sense of constant upheaval and insecurity.

Further, there is a sense that managers are deliberately trying to get employees to quit, he said. Since giving up civil service status would mean sacrificing retirement benefits, many people simply try to hold out, even if it means they have little of substance to do or they feel they are not being used effectively.

In response to a flurry of media attention, France Télécom has said it will freeze worker transfers until the end of October, establish an anonymous help line for troubled employees and add extra psychological and human resources support.

“We are the only incumbent telecoms operator not to have carried out mass redundancies,” said Olivier Barberot, the head of human resources at France Télécom.

“Most people, the bulk of them, have been able to increase their skills and move on to new jobs,” he said. “But some have had difficulty adapting.”

In an interview, Xavier Darcos, France’s employment minister, said the problem of workplace stress was not confined to France. But he criticized the company’s previous approach, saying future reorganization would be “better supervised.”

“Maybe he underestimated the effect of the transformation on staff and the media impact,” Mr. Darcos said of France Télécom’s chief executive, Didier Lombard.

“We are in a transforming economy, and the evaluation tools used are a bit out of date,” Mr. Darcos said.

Nonetheless, he said, a job, even a highly stressful one, is better than unemployment.

“For us, unemployment is the absolute failure,” Mr. Darcos said. “We prefer to have people who don’t feel totally happy at work, or to work part time, rather than people being unemployed.”

The unemployment rate in France was 9.8 percent in July, up two percentage points from a year earlier. It probably would have been even higher without government programs to subsidize the auto industry and keep workers on the payroll, at least part time.

In the end, at France Télécom, though, some things are inevitable. Echoing comments by Mr. Lombard and Mr. Darcos, Mr. Barberot, the company’s human resources chief, said, “We can’t stop the reorganization.”